

Mauritania's goals in its struggle against al-Qaeda

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The war currently waged between the Mauritanian army and al-Qaeda militants based in Mali's Wagadou Forest raises many questions about the nature and objectives of this conflict, and its political and military cost. It further demands answers about its possible outcomes and implications.

According to most reports, the clashes in Wagadou Forest were sparked on the evening of Friday, 24 June. Mauritania had announced that units of its army had launched a large-scale offensive against militants belonging to the Salafist 'Group for Preaching and Combat'. This group, based in Wagadou Forest, announced in 2007 that it had joined al-Qaeda, and began calling itself 'al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb' (AQIM). It is significant that on 24 June Mauritanian authorities began to leak information that elite units of the military were undertaking unprecedented ground and air assaults on al-Qaeda affiliates that had set up camp in a large area (eighty by forty kilometres) in southern Mali, near the Mauritanian border. The leaks were followed by an official statement on 25 June that spoke of a coordinated attack with the Malian army. The statement celebrated the joint assault as a decisive victory over al-Qaeda militants whose military camp, the statement claimed, had been destroyed. Despite being downplayed, the statement further admitted to Mauritanian casualties (four wounded, none killed). On the same day, media reports based on sources affiliated with al-Qaeda in Mali contradicted the Mauritanian statement, asserting that al-Qaeda operatives had inflicted heavy losses on the Mauritanian army and destroyed twelve assault vehicles. Mali's official statement came later that day. It said Mali's role in the attack had been limited to securing the forest's southern zone to prevent al-Qaeda militants from passing through it. The third set of reports consisted of a series of leaks to the international media. These confirmed that the attack had been coordinated with the United States, which had also provided logistical support. Talk of French intelligence support emerged later.

On the evening of Tuesday, 5 July, Mauritanian state television announced that the army had been attacked by what were described as 'terrorist groups' in the Mauritanian city of Bassikounou on the Malian border. This began a new wave of dramatic confrontations.

The Wagadou Forest incident did not, however, come as a surprise to either Mauritians or other people in the region, not only because this was the third attack on Malian territory against groups belonging to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb, but because there had been increased reports over the weeks preceding the attack of armed groups affiliated to the organisation redeploying in southern Mali – specifically in Wagadou Forest. Indeed, it had been repeatedly underscored that the Malian and Mauritanian armies were working in 'coordination' to carry out joint attacks on Wagadou Forest. On 22 June it was reported that the two armies were launching simultaneous attacks on the forest.

In light of this, the following questions need to be posed:

- What are the Mauritanian authorities' goals for the attacks on the Wagadou region?
- How can the extraterritorial attacks against al-Qaeda be read and understood militarily and politically?

It should, firstly, be noted that there are four countries where AQIM operates from: Mauritania, Mali, Niger and Algeria. If we look for their commonalities, we find – among other factors – that they are, geographically, some of the largest countries in Africa. Their territory generally extends over large expanses of the great Sahara Desert, covering more than four million square kilometres of one of the most arid, rugged and least populous deserts in the world. The desert both separates and connects the Maghreb (north-west Arab-Africa) and non-Arabic-speaking Muslim Africa. Apart from Algeria, the other three countries are among the poorest in the world, with fragile state institutions, and facing enormous challenges in maintaining control over their chronically under-developed territories.

Algeria, AQIM's birthplace, has adopted a particular stance towards this militant group. However it is noteworthy that, for at least the past five years, Mauritania has been the only country that is engaged in an open confrontation with the al-Qaeda affiliate. It is also the only one of these countries that carries out incursions beyond its borders.

A possible counter to this critique is that Mauritania should only be compared to the states of the Arab Maghreb, and not to those of the Sahel. The reason is that, due to geographical constraints, this al-

Qaeda chapter has been forced to concentrate its military presence in Mali, and, to a lesser extent, Niger. However, the organisation's manifesto indicates that despite this geographical concentration, its target area includes all five Maghreb countries. This objection, however, serves to add weight to the claims against Mauritania. Insofar as AQIM has gone beyond the Algerian arena, Mauritania is the only country of the Maghreb that has engaged in open military confrontation.

This compels us to ask why, despite its own national challenges, has Mauritania been the only country in the Maghreb and West Africa to go beyond its borders to confront al-Qaeda operatives. In other words, do Mauritanian authorities have a consistent strategy in this military campaign? This needs carefully to be considered, given that even Algeria, a country with greater capacity and experience in this area, has chosen not to engage these militants beyond its borders. Indeed, when Algeria has even shown reticence in pursuing the operatives in its southern territories, how can we then account for Mauritania's zeal?

It should be indicated that the redeployment of AQIM beyond Algeria's borders should be understood as being, at least partially, convenient for the Algerian authorities. This, regardless of how some perceive the uncertainty surrounding the relations between the organisation and some parts of the Algerian regime. This repositioning of al-Qaeda operatives is particularly significant when we consider that the attack on the Lemghayti garrison in northern Mauritania on 3 June 2005 was the first direct military threat faced by the Mauritanian army since the country withdrew from the Sahara war in 1979.

Since the joint Mauritanian-French attack on AQIM on 22 August 2010, various Mauritanian groups, both in the formal opposition and beyond, have described Mauritania as a proxy in a war that the West is waging against al-Qaeda, a war that has taken a global and existential form. They have argued that a country like Mauritania should remain neutral, and not be used as a tool. These critics often compare Mauritania's actions to those of Mali and Niger. Despite the presence of al-Qaeda affiliates and incursions in their territories, both these countries have chosen to avoid confrontation.

It is clear, however, that all the regimes of the region, including those of the Sahel, market themselves to western countries as partners in the war on terrorism. These regimes believe that it is important to use such a pretext in order to protect themselves from external or internal destabilisation. This is particularly true when we consider that these regimes have largely been unable to build solid political legitimacy. This beggars the question: does Mauritania's strategy of actively confronting AQIM stem from this desire to strengthen its security partnership with western countries?

Undoubtedly, the current confrontation has earned the Mauritanian regime some western support as well as an advanced level of coordination with the French and US intelligence services. Indeed, French foreign intelligence agents, who are particularly concerned about al-Qaeda operations in the region, have a strong regional presence. The United States also carefully monitors this al-Qaeda franchise that is at the forefront of the missions assigned to AFRICOM (the unified command for activities of the US military in Africa, with its headquarters in Stuttgart, Germany). (More information on the US' monitoring of this al-Qaeda chapter can be found in the latest version of the US national strategy for combating terrorism issued on 28 June 2011 – http://www.whitehouse.gov/sites/default/files/rss_viewer/national_security_strategy.pdf.)

However, in this relationship with the US and France, a consideration of the cost-benefit ratio is required for Mauritania. When we consider Mauritanian losses in such a long-term war of attrition – a war effectively waged between a semi-formal army with modest capabilities and few incentives, and armed groups driven by an ideological incentive – the question to be asked is whether the price that Mauritania has had to pay is commensurate to the support it has received from the US and France.

The comparison with Mali and Niger compels one to pose the question again: why have the governments of these two countries not displayed the same sort of enthusiasm as Mauritania in combating these militants? These two regimes have acquiesced to the various demands of western countries, including calls for increased cooperation by Sahel countries in the confrontation with al-Qaeda. Mali and Niger, however, view their current response to such demands as being sufficient. The only possible exception was when Mali agreed to release al-Qaeda prisoners in a prisoner-hostage

exchange which saw the release of western hostages held by the organisation. This initiative came about as a result of western negotiations with al-Qaeda. However, in similar cases, Mauritanian authorities were not as obliging, and took such steps only after the exertion of considerable pressure.

A closer look at this issue reveals that AQIM has not targeted Mali and Niger, nor has it carried out systematic attacks against their armies. It has, however, expected and relied on these countries' neutrality. Furthermore, having these armed groups operating from the north of Mali has not adversely affected the country. This is mainly because the northern region of the country has largely been beyond the state's control for decades. The region has thus been a source of constant discomfort for Mali, and the presence there of al-Qaeda groups offers a ready pretext for the state's absence. Moreover, the presence of al-Qaeda in this region – in addition to various other armed and unarmed networks – has created an alternative economy, and is a diversion for the tribes that have taken up arms against the Malian regime. The same dynamics largely hold true in Niger.

It is evident that al-Qaeda's targeting of the Mauritanian regime is different from the situation with regards to Mali and Niger. In the latter two countries, al-Qaeda has been content to focus its attacks on western targets. However, from the start of their attacks against Mauritania – i.e. since the Lemghayti attack in 2005 – al-Qaeda openly and intentionally targeted units of the Mauritanian army, and only later began to target westerners (starting with the attack in Aleg in 2007). More direct attacks on the Mauritanian army followed, such as those in al Ghalawiya (2007) and Zouérat (2008).

With a few exceptions, the circumstances of which are still unknown, AQIM has not directly targeted Mauritanian civilians. Despite this, attacks on the military since Lemghayti have been met with outrage by Mauritians. Although the attacks on the army have been condemned by the majority of Mauritania's politicians, they coincide with internal instability within the regime. For example, the Ould Taya regime was ousted on 3 August 2005, two months after the Lemghayti attack. However, this is not to suggest that the attack was a decisive factor in the coup.

The current strategy of the Mauritanian authorities, and their explicit determination to keep armed groups from encroaching on the country's border, suggest that concern around al-Qaeda has impacted on the regime's stability. The consequences of al-Qaeda attacks and the social and economic dynamics of both the regime and the citizens require further exploration.

The issue seems particularly intractable when we consider Mauritania's fear that Algeria, or some of its apparatuses, are somehow facilitating al-Qaeda's attacks on the country. Since Mauritania's withdrawal from the Sahara war in 1979, every Mauritanian leader has had to decide how to address the Moroccan-Algerian regional rivalry. The incumbent Mauritanian president, since coming to power in 2008, has enjoyed a special relationship with Morocco. Understandably, the consequence has been that the relationship with Algeria has remained tense.

A simplified reading of the Wagadou attack indicates that the attack against AQIM is a double-edged pre-emptive strike. On the one hand it aimed to prevent the group from establishing advanced positions near the Mauritanian border, thereby preventing future incursions along the south-eastern and southern border. On the other hand it aimed to prevent the stockpiling of relatively sophisticated weapons that the group was able to obtain from Libya as a result of the current crisis there. This framing suggests that the Mauritanian military used this offensive to gauge al-Qaeda's strength in a way that ensured that the Mauritanian military held the advantage. This is supported by leaked reports that suggest the Mauritanian air-force has been conducting extensive sorties over Wagadou Forest. This is consistent with reports of the group's acquisition of a number of Russian and US-made surface-to-air missiles.

Concern about the implications of al-Qaeda attacks on the stability of the Mauritanian regime is implicit in the regime's discourse. The Zouérat, Alghalawiya, Aleg and Nouakchott attacks, as well as the targeting of a Spanish convoy are not only evidence of the group's high level operational capacity within Mauritanian territory, but also demonstrate its considerable ability to infiltrate various levels of

the regime's security establishment; this after more than a decade of recruitment of Mauritanian youth.

The regional equation, however, is more complex than might be suggested by a preliminary analysis. It is extremely difficult to determine the nature of the relationship between AQIM and the Algerian security apparatuses, as well as with the Polisario Front – that shares, in part, the same geographical area without any confrontations having occurred between them. Furthermore, the group's relationship with the Moroccan authorities (the traditional rival of the Algerian regime) is still the subject of contradictory and vague leaks. Moreover, Mauritanian intelligence's relations with the group have been, and to some extent continue to be, unclear. Several sources confirm that Colonel Ould Taya's regime had concluded a secret agreement with AQIM in 2004, approximately a year before the Lemghayti attack. In many circles it is also believed that the agreement was mediated by tribal elders in the north of Mali. It is thus understandably difficult to know precisely how this alleged agreement has developed in recent years, and what its relationship is to AQIM's successive attacks.

In the context of the current phase of confrontations between the Mauritanian army and al-Qaeda fighters, we can expect the continuation, indeed the intensification, of confrontation in the near future. The outcome of this conflict, however, is less clear in the medium term, as western support for the Mauritanian army is disproportionate to the latter's human and material losses. Considering the fragility of the regional balance, Mauritania does not have considerable alternatives in this regard. Regional conflicts (such as that in the Western Sahara, with the Tuareg, and so forth) preclude the possibility of developing effective political or military coordination between the states in the region. Despite trying to show a high level of military determination, it is likely that the Mauritanian authorities are seeking to pave the way for a truce or an agreement of some sort – whether declared or secret. The current regional and international balance, however, makes reaching such a truce increasingly elusive.